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ABSTRACT

Some studies have suggested that TV encourages a variety of problems such as malnutrition, drug consumption, poor consumer habits, and violence. Others have argued that TV is a window to the world, promoting knowledge, cultural experiences and positive social values. This article examines some of these controversial claims and evaluates the impact of television on the young child. The following questions are considered: how much TV do children watch? is there a need to worry about the amount and type of viewing? does television encourage negative values such as aggression and the desire for unnecessary or harmful products? what are the positive effects of TV viewing? and how can parents and caregivers facilitate the wise use of television? (Author/MP)

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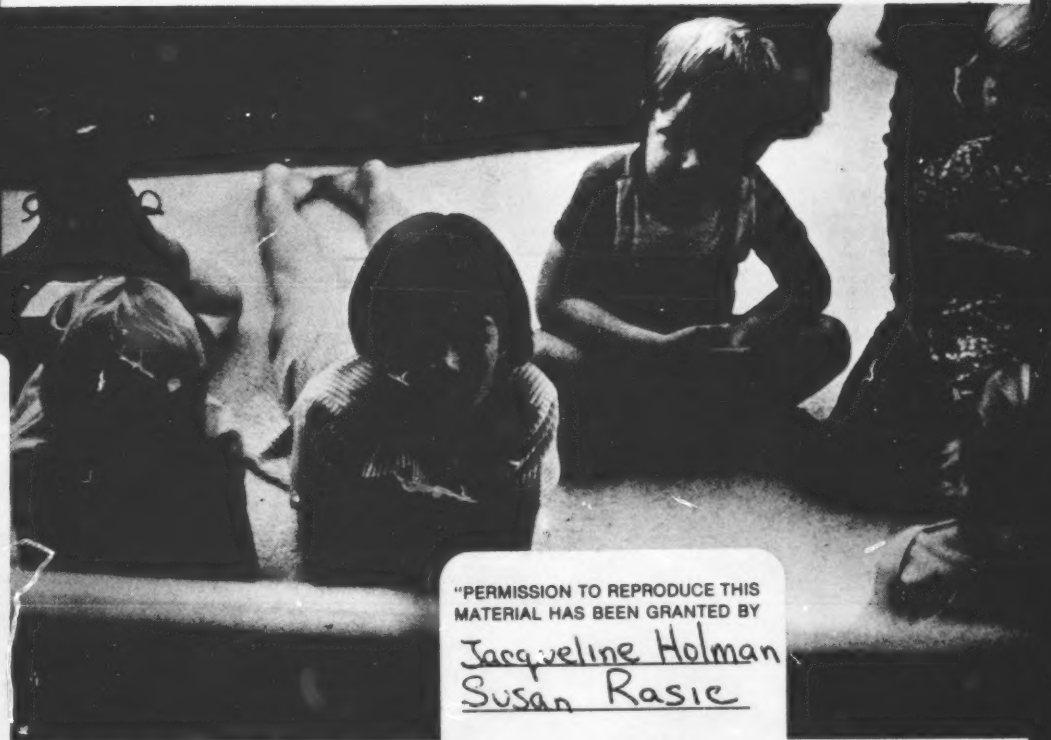
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AUSTRALIAN EARLY CHILDHOOD RESOURCE BOOKLETS

No. 5, 1980

THE IMPACT OF TELEVISION DURING EARLY CHILDHOOD

by Jacqueline Holman



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THE IMPACT OF TELEVISION DURING EARLY CHILDHOOD

Television is the most pervasive medium known to modern society: its major function is to inform and to entertain. Ninety six per cent of Australian households have at least one television set; 62% have a coloured receiver (Kippax and Murray, 1979). Given this ownership pattern, it is hardly surprising that television is often given the status almost of a "family member" or that it monopolises more of the average child's time than any other single activity, apart from sleep (Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts). Unquestionably, television exerts an influence in the lives of most people: the extent and type of influence is, however, a highly controversial issue. Some writers have suggested that TV encourages a variety of problems such as malnutrition, drug consumption, consumerism and violence (cf. Skornia, 1979). Others have argued that TV is a window to the world, promoting knowledge, cultural experiences and positive social values (Miller, 1971). The purpose of this article is to examine some of these controversial claims and, in particular, to evaluate the impact of television during early childhood. Questions to be considered will include: how much television do young children watch; is there a need to worry about the amount or type of viewing; does television encourage negative values such as consumerism and aggression; what are the positive effects of TV viewing; and, how can parents and caregivers facilitate the wise use of television.

Hours and Patterns of Television Usage by Young Children

Estimating the exact amount of time which children spend viewing television is rather a problem because children and parents seem to find this a difficult task and because there are seasonal and situational variations in viewing, e.g. children are most likely to view for longer periods during wet weather. Overseas estimates of daily viewing suggest that Canadian children (two to six years) watch around twenty hours per week; British children (under 12) watch around 2.75 hours per day; and American children (1st graders) 22-24 hours per week (Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts, 1978).

Recent surveys by Australian researchers (Tindall, Reid and Goodwin, 1977) indicate similar trends in this country, for example, the average lower primary child watches television for about 18 hours per week. Information regarding the amount of TV that Australian pre-schoolers watch is rather limited though a recent survey suggests an average rate of about 10 hours per week (Braithwaite and Holman, 1980). These average figures, however, might be somewhat misleading because there is wide variation among individual viewers, e.g., the Braithwaite and Holman study reported child viewing times ranged from 0 to 45 hours per week with just over 30% of the sample being classified as high viewers, i.e., watching between 14 and 45 hours per week.

FOCUS POINTS FOR PARENTS

- 1 HOW MUCH TV DOES YOUR CHILD WATCH DAILY?
- 2 IS YOUR CHILD A HIGH OR LOW VIEWER?
- 3 WHAT FACTORS SEEM TO INFLUENCE THE AMOUNT OF TV YOUR CHILD WATCHES (YOUR CONTROL, THE WEATHER, ETC.)?

Factors Associated with High TV Viewing

The data available in Australia and overseas indicates a clearly defined pattern of viewing associated with age. Viewing rates increase from approximately age three, peaking in adolescence, and then declining (Stein and Freidrich, 1975; Tindall *et al.*, 1977).

Children from lower socioeconomic status homes on the average, view more TV than children from higher status homes (Tindall, *et al.*, 1977). Additionally, high

amounts of TV viewing seem to be associated with lower intelligence (Tindall and Reid, 1975) and poor self-esteem (Edgar, 1977).

FOCUS POINTS FOR PARENTS

- 1 DO YOU THINK YOUR CHILDREN ARE WATCHING MORE TV AS THEY GROW OLDER?
- 2 WHAT DOES YOUR CHILD DO WHILE WATCHING TV (e.g., WATCH PASSIVELY, WATCH INTERMITTENTLY, WATCH WHILE DOING OTHER THINGS SUCH AS PLAYING WITH TOYS)?
- 3 DO YOU THINK YOUR CHILDREN HAVE HIGH OR LOW SELF-ESTEEM? IS THEIR SELF-ESTEEM POSSIBLY RELATED TO THE AMOUNT OR TYPE OF TV WHICH THEY WATCH?



Program Preference

Not a great deal of information is available regarding the program preferences of young children. Tindall *et al.*, however, noted that lower primary children rated family comedy shows as their favourite in the following order: Brady Bunch, I Dream of Jeannie, Cartoon Corner, Bugs Bunny, and Super Flying Fun Show. Pre-schoolers in the Braithwaite and Holman (1980) survey named the following as their favourite types of shows: 64% educational (e.g., Sesame Street, Playschool); 39% child-oriented variety (e.g., Humphrey Bear) and cartoons (38%). There was also a slight preference for boys to like cartoons more than girls.

FOCUS POINTS FOR PARENTS

- 1 WHAT ARE YOUR CHILD'S FAVOURITE PROGRAMS?
- 2 WOULD YOU PREFER THEY HAD SOME OTHER FAVOURITES?
- 3 WHAT INFLUENCE DO YOU THINK THEIR FAVOURITE PROGRAMS MIGHT BE HAVING ON THEM?

Why Worry About the Impact of TV on Young Children

Some authors have argued that the influence of TV will be moderated or filtered by family influences (Brown and Linné, 1976). There are two factors, however, which suggest that perhaps we should be concerned. Firstly, it seems that many parents exert minimal control over their children's viewing. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, children may see a lot of behaviour on TV which would be undesirable for them to copy — if they are likely to copy these models then perhaps as caregivers we should be worried. While many parents attempt to influence the kinds of messages which children receive from the medium, it might be useful to ask, just how much do parents control their children's viewing patterns, in terms of amount watched or program type. The available information suggests that most children choose their own programs most of the time.

If parents are not exerting very much control, perhaps we should ask a more specific question: how might TV's influence be negative? George Gerbner and his colleagues have been considering this question by analysing the content of children's television programs — on an annual basis since 1967 (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan and Jackson-Beeck, 1979). Gerbner *et al.*, have argued that television is an especially important force because it presents to children a notion of socially constructed reality, i.e., "a coherent picture of what exists, what is important, how things are related, and what is right" (p. 179). Furthermore, the picture which TV usually creates is one which promotes conventional social morality and stereotyped images of our society.

How realistic then is the world of TV? Gerbner argues "not very" and additionally claims that TV distorts our notions of how society operates and what kinds of behaviours are acceptable. One basis of Gerbner's claims is that commercial television (U.S. programs, many of which are available in Australia) presents a view of the world which is intensely violent and that despite criticisms of this type of programming, the amount of violence being portrayed is apparently increasing — especially during children's programming. For example, in children's weekend programs, a rate of 25 violent incidents per hour were occurring. Additionally, certain groups of characters were more consistently victimized than committed violence, especially women, non-whites, and foreigners.

Given that violence is an integral part of dramatic programming, what does this do to a viewer's perception of social reality? Gerbner investigated this issue by asking adolescents about four areas (chances of involvement in violence, fear of walking alone at night, perceived activities of the police, and mistrust) and comparing their answers in terms of whether they reflected reality or the world of television. With all comparisons, heavy viewers consistently overestimated the proportions involved, i.e. they were more likely to give a "television" answer. Thus, heavy viewers seem to have a different notion of social reality: they felt that their chances of being involved in a violent incident were higher, they were more afraid of walking alone in their own neighbourhood, they believed that the police often needed to resort to violence, and also they expressed greater mistrust of people and felt that, basically, people are fairly selfish. Similar results were reported for a younger group of children aged seven to eleven years. Gerbner concluded that these greater expressions of fear and mistrust could be linked to heavy television viewing and noted that the most significant finding of his long term project was that "one correlate of television viewing is a heightened and unequal sense of danger and risk in a mean and selfish world" (p. 196).

If the perceptions of older children and adolescents are distorted in this way, we might well question just what is happening to younger children whose powers of reasoning are still rather undeveloped. Leifer, Gordon, and Graves (1974) examined

a more basic issue: they assessed the types of cues employed by children (4-14 years) in discriminating between the world of television and reality. They concluded that children of **all** ages had difficulty in explaining just how they decided whether or not a program represented reality. Leifer *et al.*, pointed out that we know almost nothing about how reality cues are interpreted by children.

Following on from this information, Quarfoth (1979) explored children's understanding of the nature of television characters by examining their ability to discriminate between human, puppet, and animated characters. Quarfoth reported a predictable increase in discrimination skills as children got older. Thus, while only 48% of kindergarteners were accurately separating human, puppet and animated characters, 95% of 4th graders were able to do so. (Percentages for the intervening ages were as follows: 1st grade, 57%; 2nd grade, 75%; and 3rd grade, 83%). An important point which Quarfoth stressed was that young children do not process information in the same way as adults do. Additionally, she argued that if they are not discriminating between real and cartoon figures, then the portrayal of high rates of violence in cartoon programs may not be a desirable feature.

All this suggests that TV programs may be giving our children unreal and indeed undesirable pictures of our society. We surely need to consider ways of avoiding this influence on development as we also need to find ways of promoting more positive values.

FOCUS POINTS FOR PARENTS

- 1 HOW REALISTIC IS YOUR CHILD'S PERCEPTION OF THE WORLD?
- 2 CAN YOUR CHILD DISTINGUISH BETWEEN PUPPETS, CARTOON CHARACTERS AND REAL PEOPLE?



Do We Really Know that Violent Programming is a Problem?

So far we have reviewed some evidence which suggests that heavy viewers of television see the world in a less pleasant light and tend to be more fearful. We have also established that young children have difficulty in distinguishing between the real world and the television world. But does all this really matter? What evidence is there that violence in programming leads to undesirable behaviours, or, do children copy what they watch?



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Two factors seem to be important here: one is the possibility that viewing violence encourages aggressive activities and secondly, watching violence may lower the sensitivity of viewers to such action and thus make it more likely that they will generally accept higher rates of aggression.

Clearly, television fiction presents an inordinate amount of physical abuse, murders, beatings, etc. Therefore, children who watch even small amounts of television will be exposed to actions which they might not otherwise encounter. Furthermore, other methods of problem solving are rarely displayed. Does this exposure to violence encourage children to display aggressive behaviours? Albert Bandura is one researcher who would argue that this is the case. Most of the research conducted and prompted by Bandura is experimental in nature and this type of study does suggest a strong link between the viewing of violence and the performance of aggressive acts.

Many of these experimental investigations have been conducted in laboratory settings. Typically a situation is arranged in which a child views a model (either live or on TV) engaging in various behaviours including some novel, aggressive ones. For example, a model might be seen to walk into a room saying "march, march, march"; pick up a hammer and begin to pound a life-size blow-up Bobo doll; kick the doll and throw it to the ground. The child would then be left in a room which contained similar materials (as well as neutral ones, e.g., crayons and paper) and the doll. An unseen observer would then score the child for number of imitative actions, i.e., count how many times the child copied the model. There have been many variations of this basic experiment but essentially they all yield the same results. Children who watch a model displaying violent behaviours are themselves more likely to display those behaviours than children who have watched a neutral film. Additionally, boys

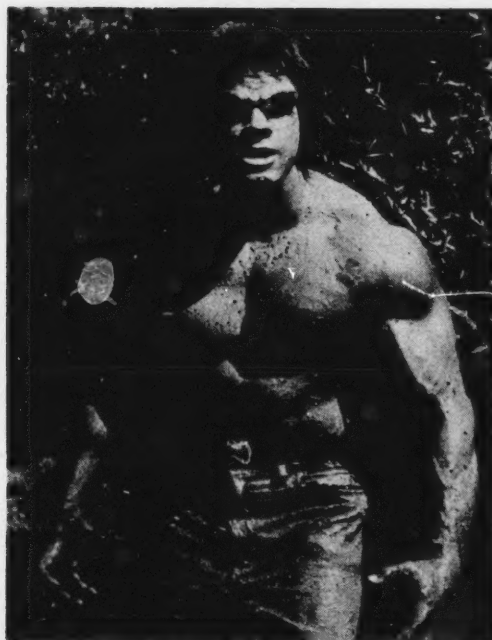
usually display more aggressive actions than girls and males are more likely to be imitated than are females (Bandura, 1973).

In this experimental situation then, viewing violence does appear to result in aggression. There have, however, been many criticisms directed at these demonstrations. One argument is that just because this result occurs in the laboratory does not mean that similar effects would occur in more naturalistic settings such as a child's home. Furthermore, children might pay less attention to TV violence when they watch in other settings or perhaps the presence of adults would prevent the display of aggression. Despite such criticisms, it does seem clear that under these specific circumstances, aggressive imitation is quite probable. Hence, the possibility that viewing violence might actually reduce aggression, allowing a draining off of such impulses through fantasy, seems at best unlikely.

Unfortunately, then, it seems to be undeniable that children, adolescents, and adults who are heavy viewers of violent programs, do learn more about aggression from television; they are also more likely to approve of the use of violence and to consider it an effective means of conflict resolution than are light viewers (Stein and Freidrich, 1975). Additionally, it also seems that TV violence may breed indifference to suffering.

This issue of deadened emotions was examined by Drabman and Thomas (1975). They set up a situation in which individual children (from 3rd, 4th or 5th grade) were shown either a violent (a current detective program) or non violent film. The experimenter then explained that he had to make an important phone call but that he was also supposed to keep an eye on some younger children who were to be left (briefly) in a nearby caravan which was fitted with closed circuit television. The child was asked to help the experimenter by keeping an eye on the youngsters until the phone call was completed. Additionally, the child was instructed to fetch the experimenter if anything happened. All children then watched a videotape which they believed was "live". Briefly, two children arrived in the caravan with an adult who instructed them to play with the toys while he was gone; the children played quietly for a while; they then began verbally abusing each other's activities; finally, this led to pushing, shoving and crying and the fight got progressively worse until it appeared that the camera was destroyed. Meanwhile, the experimenter waited outside the room and recorded the amount of time it took before the supervising child would summon appropriate adult help. The only difference between the two groups of children was that they viewed either a violent or non-violent film. Yet this exposure seemed to have powerful effects on their behaviour. Both boys and girls who watched the violent film took much longer to seek appropriate adult help than children who watched a non-violent film or merely played with the toys. Drabman and Thomas suggested a chilling conclusion to their study, i.e., that "TV violence may be having the effect of exacerbating some children's violent behaviour while at the same time teaching the rest to tolerate this aggression" (p. 88).

There is also an accumulated body of evidence which suggests that viewing violent television (in home settings) is consistently related to aggressive behaviours. These aggressive behaviours were assessed by asking children to rate themselves and by looking at peer and teacher ratings on aggression: the relationships held across all measures (Stein and Freidrich, 1975). One problem with studies of this type, which look at relationships between factors, is that it is hard to tell which caused what, e.g., does viewing violent programs cause aggressive behaviours or do aggressive individuals select violent programs for viewing? While this issue will not easily be resolved, Stein and Freidrich have argued forcibly that the two factors are interrelated . . . "the more aggressive a child is, the more likely that child is to seek out violent television and the more likely that child is to show increased aggression as a result of seeing that violent television." (p. 214).



The same conclusion regarding violence is drawn by Murray (1973) and he has suggested that there is a clear need to reduce the level of aggression portrayed on television and to promote prosocial content of television programs. This goal of changing programming content is undoubtedly laudable and one which we should all attempt to achieve; while the content battles are being fought, however, surely as responsible adults we should at least be monitoring the content of our children's programs and censoring those whose violence content seems high. Perhaps we are not sure that watching that particular program will cause our individual child to behave aggressively — but do we really want to take the risk?

FOCUS POINTS FOR PARENTS

- 1 DO YOUR CHILDREN LIST VIOLENT PROGRAMS AMONG THEIR FAVOURITES?
- 2 HAVE YOU EVER DISAPPROVED OF A VIOLENT PROGRAM BY TURNING IT OFF?
- 3 HAVE YOU NOTICED YOUR CHILD IMITATING AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOURS DISPLAYED ON TELEVISION?

Does TV Encourage Consumerism?

Television advertisers are paying for the programs which we watch; this payment does not occur through altruistic desires on the part of these companies to provide the general community with entertainment. Rather, particular programs are supported because they guarantee a captive audience for the reception of commercial messages. Most parents have experienced a situation where their child, having carefully attended to and remembered a particular advertised product, will subsequently request (sometimes demand) that particular item. Since the buying power of children is somewhat restricted, the kinds of advertisements which they are most likely to view will be concerned with fast foods, biscuits, sweets, drinks, and toys.

Kippax and Murray (1979) have noted a number of criticisms of advertisements directed toward children. They argued that children are being constantly bombarded with commercials which may be harmful to their physical and mental health. Since TV viewing is frequently a passive activity, eating snack foods while watching programs is highly probable and some of these snack foods may be of doubtful nutritional value. Additionally, regular exposure to a particular type of highly desirable product (e.g., toys) may encourage selfish demands for unnecessary goods and thus promote a consumerist philosophy of life. There is a danger then that advertisements are not merely encouraging the buying of a particular kind of chocolate bar, or space toy, but that they are selling a particular lifestyle and perhaps undermining the values which as caregivers we would like to promote during the impressionable years.

Pre-schoolers find it difficult to distinguish commercials from programs. Nevertheless, they often repeat brand names, slogans and jingles and it seems that these memories do in fact influence a child's product preferences or perhaps suggest the existence of a preference to the parents. As children develop greater cognitive skills, they express more cynicism about and dislike of commercials. Despite the fact that their attitudes toward TV advertising become less favourable as they grow older, the behavioural effects, e.g., requests for advertised products, remain essentially constant. In other words, children are susceptible to advertising, and they remain so, even when they report disliking the commercials involved (Rossiter, 1979).

FOCUS POINTS FOR PARENTS

- 1 HAVE YOU EVER HEARD YOUR CHILD SINGING COMMERCIAL JINGLES (e.g., "I feel like a . . .")?
- 2 HAS YOUR CHILD EVER REQUESTED PRODUCTS ADVERTISED ON TV (e.g., foodstuffs such as sweets and ice blocks or cereal or toys)?
- 3 IF YOU HAVE HAD SUCH A REQUEST, WHAT DID YOU DO?



What about the Positive Effects of Watching Television?

So far we have been concerned about identifying the potentially harmful effects associated with TV viewing. If TV can promote undesirable learning, however, it must also be able to promote positive social learning — just how much is known about this more favourable side of TV?



Children's Television Workshop

Cognitive Gains/Creative Play

Does television help children to develop their thinking skills? At least some of the evidence indicates that it does. For example, *Sesame Street* (one of the earliest programs designed to cater for children's needs rather than merely capture their attention for endless commercial messages) viewers are reported to increase their skills in several areas. Lesser (1974) claimed that children who watched *Sesame Street* showed more rapid development in particular skills e.g., numbers, letter recognition and body parts; later evidence seems to suggest, however, that learning is more permanent when a parent or adult encourages the viewing. The imaginative play of children (Singer and Singer, 1974) was shown to increase after children viewed a series of Mr. Rogers' programs — again, the effects were stronger when an adult was present during viewing to focus attention on relevant aspects of the program.

Social Gains

What about gains in positive social values? This area has received far less attention than the violence-aggression relationship yet surely is an important issue. Freidrich and Stein (1973) examined the effects of aggressive and prosocial television on the behaviour of children aged between 3 and 5 years. The children were observed during free play periods to measure their normal levels of prosocial (cooperative, nurturant, constructive) behaviour and aggressive (verbally or physically abusive) behaviour. The children were also observed for rule obedience and self-control during this period.

Each child was then assigned to one of three different groups of TV viewing conditions:

1. an **aggressive** condition in which they watched 12 episodes of "Batman" or "Superman"
2. a **prosocial** condition during which they watched 12 episodes of Mr. Rogers' Neighbourhood (a program specially designed to teach positive behaviours such as sharing and helping)
3. a **neutral** condition in which they viewed films about nature, animals, etc.



Photograph from ABC and reprinted with permission.

Free play observations of the children's behaviours were continued during the viewing period to evaluate the effect of the programs.

As we might expect, viewing aggressive films did lead to an increase in aggression for some children. Additionally, the children in this group also declined in two self-control behaviours, i.e., tolerance for delay (patience) and observance of nursery school rules. On the other hand, children who watched Mr. Rogers' Neighbourhood were more likely to tolerate delay, obey rules and to be more cooperative and friendly.

Apparently, exposure to ethnic minorities on TV programs may be a useful way of reducing prejudice towards such groups. For example, one study (Gorn, Goldberg and Kanungo, 1976) found that following such exposure, pre-schoolers were more likely to choose minority children as desirable playmates.

All in all, programs which promote positive social values can help young children to gain broader social skills. This seems to be particularly true when an adult has watched the program with the child and highlighted certain values as being desirable.

FOCUS POINTS FOR PARENTS

- 1 DO YOU ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO WATCH PROGRAMS YOU CONSIDER DESIRABLE?
- 2 DO YOU WATCH SUCH PROGRAMS WITH YOUR CHILD?
- 3 DO YOU ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO COPY DESIRABLE BEHAVIOURS SEEN ON TV?
- 4 DO YOU TALK ABOUT IDEAS RAISED IN PROGRAMS OR MODEL BEHAVIOURS VIEWED SO THAT YOUR CHILD HAS A CHANCE TO PRACTISE BEHAVIOURS YOU VALUE?



Stereotyping and Unreal Lifestyles on Television

Many writers have argued that television programs, and indeed commercials, present and perpetuate restricted notions of social roles and lifestyles. Such presentations are particularly undesirable when viewed by children who are in the process of acquiring personal values and a sense of identity or self-concept. If television programs display a restricted viewpoint in terms of social class, ethnicity, or sex, then heavy viewers are likely to acquire a narrow perception of desirable and possible roles.

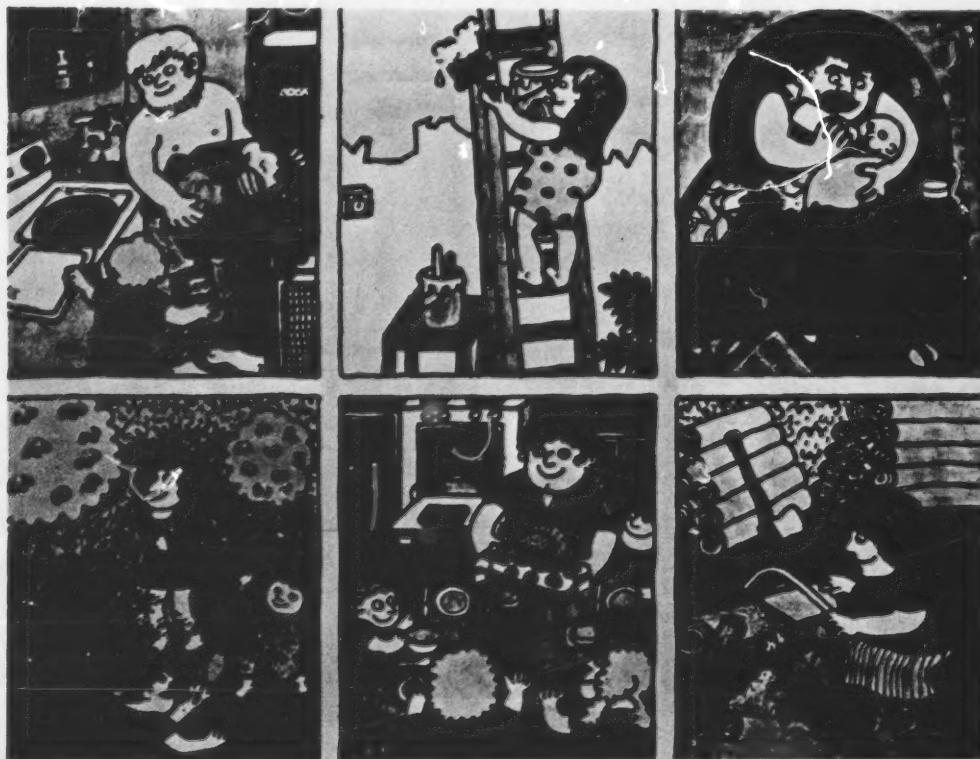
The most vocal criticisms regarding television's portrayal of lifestyles have probably been expressed about the rigid stereotyping of the sexes, and particularly the portrayal of women. One submission to the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (1977) noted that "Women and girls in advertisements are almost universally depicted in subordinate roles or domestic situations. . . . the Australian woman . . . has, as her major preoccupation, the capture and retention of a male partner, her physical appearance, the cleanliness of her crockery, floors and washing, and the nurture of infants . . . She is somewhat stupid, needs male advice on anything mechanical (and lots of things non-mechanical) or, if she is intelligent, spends a lot of time concealing the fact . . ."

This summary may appear to be somewhat emotive but the general picture is consistently supported by research which demonstrates that women are typically represented as more emotional and dependent and less important than males (Busby, 1975). When women are shown to be independent and capable, they typically achieve this through magic (e.g., *I Dream of Jeannie* or *Bewitched*). Males, on the other hand, are presented in programs twice as often as females and usually in dominant, aggressive, independent, and adventurous roles. Other examples of TV programs contributing to misperceptions of our culture can be seen in the absence of minority group representatives (whether single parents or ethnic groups) in Australian programming.

The important point to note here is that these stereotyped portrayals of men and women are providing our children with notions of conventionally "appropriate" sex-role behaviours. If we would like our boys to enjoy the rewards of more nurturing roles and our girls to grow up more independent (after all, some 35% of Australian women are in the workforce), then it is clear we will need to counteract the pictures being presented on TV.

FOCUS POINTS FOR PARENTS

- 1 DOES YOUR CHILD DISPLAY RIGID SEX-ROLES?
- 2 WHAT KINDS OF SEX-ROLES DO YOU MODEL AS PARENTS?
- 3 DO YOU POINT OUT EXAMPLES OF MORE FLEXIBLE ROLES (e.g., women driving buses, men minding infants, etc.)?



The Potential Effects of Television – A Summary

So far we have tried to evaluate just what might be the negative and positive effects of television viewing. Perhaps it might be useful here to summarize these factors as they influence the physical, emotional, intellectual, and social development of young children.

i. **Physical** Children who are high TV viewers and who sit passively for long periods in front of the television are likely to be harmed physically. In part, this might result simply from the fact that by spending so much time in front of the "box", there is little time left for the more active explorations of childhood. If physical exercise is neglected as an alternative form of recreation, children are less likely to learn to enjoy physical activities and games or learn how to actively explore their environments. Additionally, if passive viewing is accompanied by the consumption of vast quantities of "junk" food, this may encourage nutritional imbalance, dental caries, and perhaps obesity.



2. **Intellectual** Undoubtedly, television is an important source of information, behaviour, and attitudes. Children can be exposed to exciting and stimulating sources of knowledge which may increase their cognitive skills and perhaps their imaginative expression. Again, however, the presence of an encouraging adult who elaborates on or discusses program ideas seems to be a key factor in whether or not the child learns these skills.

3. **Emotional** We have seen that viewing violence can lead children to imitate aggressive behaviours and that sheer exposure may also dull their emotional sensitivity. Many factors undoubtedly influence whether an individual child will directly copy aggressive behaviours viewed – one key factor which seems to reduce the likelihood of such undesirable imitation, however, is the child's knowledge that the parent/care-giver disapproves of such action.

4. **Social** Prosocial behaviour has been examined more in relation to pre-school children than in any other age group. Generally, the research indicates that when children are exposed to programs designed to display socially valued behaviours, they will acquire these. Following the viewing of such programs, positive increases have been demonstrated in co-operation, sharing, empathy, and self-control.



FOCUS POINTS FOR PARENTS

- 1 DID YOU WATCH TV AS A CHILD?
- 2 IF SO, WHAT WAS YOUR FAVOURITE PROGRAM AND WHY?
- 3 WHO WATCHED IT WITH YOU?
- 4 HOW DID IT INFLUENCE YOU?
- 5 IF YOU GREW UP WITHOUT TELEVISION, WHAT OTHER ACTIVITIES DID YOU DO?
- 6 WHAT ACTIVITIES IS YOUR CHILD MISSING BECAUSE OF TV VIEWING?



The Role of Parents and Caregivers in Relation to Television

This booklet has sought to evaluate the impact of television on the young child by considering several questions concerned with how much TV children watch, and what might be the potential positive and negative effects of viewing. The issue before us now is perhaps a more challenging one: what should we — as thoughtful adults in care of children — do to control the impact which TV exerts. In other words, how can we encourage the positive aspects of TV and at the same time prevent or filter the negative aspects?

Recently, it has become fashionable to urge parents to become more aware of television and to show greater concern (Schiller, 1979; Leifer, Gordon and Graves, 1974). Researchers have urged parents to respond to the needs of children by encouraging better programs and by controlling the influence of TV more carefully. They have been less specific, however, as to how parents should promote these goals. Hopefully, the following list might provide a useful starting point.

1. Be aware of your children's viewing patterns: know how much television they watch. Restrict the viewing to a sensible limit so that other more active leisure patterns are not totally displaced.
2. Monitor your children's program preferences — know what they like to watch; make sure that you approve of the content. Teach them to be critical viewers.
3. Discourage the viewing of violent programs. If your child is exposed to violence on TV, try to make your own values about this clear — help the child to understand that violence is generally undesirable and that many other problem solving strategies exist.
4. Young children (as well as older children and some adults) sometimes have distorted perceptions of the real world because of the knowledge they gain from television. Try to ensure that your children receive information and input from different sources; if they learn to use a variety of sources while expanding their knowledge, then their understanding may be more realistic.
5. Fact and fantasy are difficult for young children to distinguish — you can help them to make this distinction if you talk about the programs.
6. Stereotyping, in terms of sex roles, family structure, and ethnicity, is dominant in TV programming and commercials. To counteract your child accepting a very narrow definition of such roles, try to make comparisons with situations in your immediate environment. Point out that some fathers can change nappies as part of a nurturing role (and without the need of a beer to then help them recover!!); identify women working in nontraditional occupations; talk about different family structures, e.g., single parent versus nuclear families; try to share some of the benefits of our multi-cultural society, e.g., different foods (Schurch and Waterford, 1979).
7. If you wish to promote knowledge being offered via television, watch the programs with your child. Cognitive skills and social skills seem to be acquired much more quickly when an important adult is present to encourage the process.
8. If you find your child is becoming acquisitive for goods advertised on television, remember that you don't have to buy them. Do not purchase goods which you consider unnecessary or undesirable on the command of the "box". If you succumb to such suggestions, you are also teaching your child to become an uncritical consumer.
9. If you find your child watching programs which you feel to be undesirable, you can always turn the television off. In the short term, this may create immediate problems of family conflict but in the long run you may be glad.
10. Finally, encourage the development of programs designed to cater for children's needs. Write to the stations who are doing a good job and tell them so; send your criticisms to those who are filling children's viewing time with cheap reruns. Start a local discussion group to encourage legislation for better children's programs.

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